

# Wild Thinkers

## Linn-Benton Community College's Creative and Collaborative Approach to Guided Pathways Reforms

By Maggie P. Fay and Hana Lahr

SERIES ON CHANGE MANAGEMENT AT AACC PATHWAYS COLLEGES: CASE STUDY 2 OF 5



In fall 2018, CCRC researchers conducted site visits at eight community colleges implementing guided pathways to learn how they are managing the whole-college change process involved. These colleges are among the 30 nationally that were in the first cohort of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Pathways Project, a national demonstration initiative that was launched in late 2015 to show how community colleges could create clearer pathways to program completion, employment, and further education for all students.

Our full report on this study, *Redesigning Your College Through Guided Pathways: Lessons From Community Colleges in the AACC Pathways Project*, synthesizes lessons from all eight colleges we visited and shares new findings on how long it takes to implement guided pathways at scale. Here, we provide a case study of Linn-Benton Community College in Oregon. During a two-day site visit to the college, CCRC researchers conducted one-hour interviews with 18 faculty members, administrators, advisors and counselors, and other staff. Researchers also held hour-long focus groups with 12 additional faculty members, advisors and counselors, and students at the college. Based on the data we collected, in this report we describe the organizational change work that has enabled Linn-Benton's exceptional progress in redesigning academic programs, student services, and related support systems using the guided pathways model.

## About Linn-Benton

Linn-Benton Community College is located in Albany, Oregon, a city of roughly 53,000 in the northwest part of the state. Linn-Benton has satellite campuses in Corvallis, Lebanon, and Sweet Home and enrolls around 5,800 students in credit-bearing courses across more than 85 career-technical education and transfer-oriented degree programs. In 2011, the state of Oregon enacted a law that set an ambitious postsecondary attainment goal: that by 2025, 40 percent of its young residents would complete a two-year degree or certificate. As of 2016, 19 percent of Oregonians ages 25–34 had earned an associate degree or career certificate. Linn-Benton set a separate attainment goal to increase students' rate of degree completion or transfer within three years, which stood at 32 percent during the 2016–17 school year, to 50 percent.

## Overview

Linn-Benton's approach to guided pathways reforms has been characterized by wild thinking and deliberative planning. When the college joined the AACC Pathways Project in 2015, its leaders recognized that implementing sustainable reforms would require a paradigm shift in the college's approach to student success and a cultural transformation to make that shift in practice. To secure the broad involvement needed, Linn-Benton's leaders encouraged a grassroots approach to implementation, allowing ample time for faculty and staff to exercise their creativity in deciding how to tailor the guided pathways model to reflect the college's culture and priorities.

Linn-Benton created “innovation councils” where faculty and staff could think freely about how to redesign college practices and systems without concern for institutional conventions or practical constraints. With the innovation councils, college leaders aimed to mitigate the tendency of working groups to try, to come up with the perfect solution on the first try or to drift toward commonly accepted best practices. They wanted faculty and staff to be open to experimentation and to see reforms as evolving.

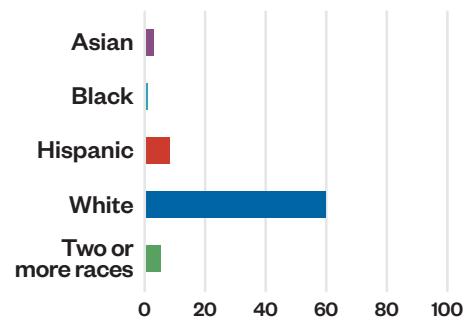
College leaders did not dictate how faculty and staff should implement guided pathways but rather allowed them to devise strategies that reflected the culture and norms of their departments and units. As a result, Linn-Benton has been able to implement several core guided pathways practices at scale, including meta-majors, program maps, a first-year experience that supports educational planning, and a redesigned model of advising. An early and ongoing focus on advising was also critical. The college

## STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS 2016-17

Credit program students enrolled:

**11,107**

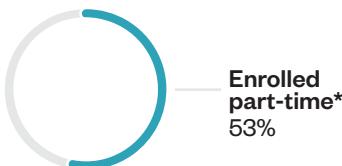
Race/ethnicity:



Gender:



Enrollment status:



\*Fall 2017 only

conceived of problems with advising as “everybody’s problem,” so instead of blaming and further burdening existing advisors, Linn-Benton expanded its advising staff and engaged other members of the college community in advising work. Finally, embedding guided pathways goals in the college’s mission signaled that the reforms are now a part of the institutional culture.

## Guided Pathways Practices Linn-Benton Has Implemented at Scale

### Meta-majors

Linn-Benton established seven meta-majors, which it calls “programs of study,” to organize its offerings on its website and help entering students explore their options. Students are initially assigned to a meta-advisor who works with them to clarify their interests, and later they are reassigned to a faculty advisor in their major. Each meta-major has core courses, allowing undecided students to explore their interests before choosing a major and without accruing unnecessary credits.

### Program Maps

Linn-Benton created maps for all its programs. Now in their second iteration, the maps are used by advisors and students as a basis for creating individualized, full-program educational plans. Faculty and advisors collaborated on the mapping process, and faculty engaged in cross-department conversations to identify electives and appropriate math sequences for their programs. Linn-Benton is in the process of making program maps more customizable so they can easily include developmental courses or account for prior credits students earned at other institutions.

### A First-Year Experience That Supports Educational Planning

Linn-Benton implemented a one-credit orientation course for first-year students in fall 2012. The college made the course mandatory in 2014 for all new students except those entering with more than 24 transfer credits or those concurrently enrolled at Oregon State University as part of a degree partnership program. Students are now assigned to a meta-advisor as part of the course. Students are required to meet with their meta-advisor to make a long-term educational plan by the end of their first term. They are encouraged to meet with their advisor each term to update their plan, though doing so is not currently mandatory.

### Sustained and Proactive Advising

Beginning in 2014, quite early in its institutional change efforts, the college pushed to improve advising so that all students, not just those in special programs or involved in athletics, would receive proactive, one-on-one support. Linn-Benton changed its advising structures to relieve full-time advisors of the responsibility of onboarding students, thereby lowering advisor caseloads. As part of this work, the college created

the New Student Center, where incoming students meet with enrollment specialists and student ambassadors who help them register for their first term of classes.

## Laying the Groundwork for Whole-College Redesign

### Institutional Research and Self-Examination

According to college leaders, faculty, and staff members, Linn-Benton's participation in Foundations of Excellence and Achieving the Dream (ATD) provided the bedrock for its guided pathways work. Both projects helped Linn-Benton identify barriers to student success and develop practices and structures that were critical for subsequent college-wide reforms.

From 2009 to 2012, Linn-Benton participated in Foundations of Excellence, an initiative developed by the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education to improve students' first-year experience. According to Dr. Ann Buchele, Linn-Benton's vice president for academic affairs and workforce development, collaborating with Foundations of Excellence encouraged members of the college community to reflect on their practices and identify barriers to college entry and first-year success. As a result of this work, Linn-Benton created a first-year experience course called Destination Graduation in 2012 and opened the New Student Center, where recent enrollees receive onboarding support, in 2015.

In 2012, Linn-Benton expanded its capacity for self-examination by joining ATD, a consortium of colleges engaged in developing the capacity to collect and analyze student data and to implement reforms. Many of our interviewees observed that participating in ATD changed how the college collects and uses data. Previously, its institutional research office had primarily used data for external reporting. Participating in ATD helped college leaders and faculty recognize the importance of using data to look internally and evaluate programs and practices. The college's president, Dr. Greg Hamann, called this inward-looking use of data "an institutional form of biofeedback" and noted that participating in Foundations of Excellence and ATD led to a modernization of the college's institutional research department, which supported Linn-Benton's subsequent engagement in guided pathways.

#### Learning Outcomes on the Destination Graduation Syllabus

Upon successful completion of Destination Graduation, you will be able to:

1. Identify your responsibilities, characteristics of successful students, and the barriers to college success.
2. Apply introductory critical thinking skills.
3. Navigate important electronic educational resources.
4. Develop a specific education plan related to your career/educational goal.
5. Locate and know how to access support services and educational resources.
6. Establish relationships with peers, LBCC faculty, staff, and an advising relationship with a designated academic advisor.

*Source: Boro-Boswell (2018).*

The limitations the college encountered in its ATD work also informed its approach to guided pathways. Senior leaders noted that while members of the college learned a lot from ATD, much of the work was not scalable. Moreover, only pockets of the college were involved in the ATD work, which further limited the scale of reform. As a result of this experience, the college's senior leadership recognized the importance of engaging the entire institution in rethinking and redesigning the college's approach to student success.

## Wild Thinking to Refocus the College's Mission on Student Success Goals

Around the same time Linn-Benton began its work with ATD, it changed its mission to focus more on goals than on actions. Dr. Hamann observed that a mission focused on actions dictates behavior, while a mission focused on goals leaves room for more creative approaches. To redefine the college's mission, he convened a committee of volunteers to form the Wild Thinkers Forum and instructed its members to think as creatively as possible, deferring concerns about practical constraints. This experience served as an instructive precursor to the development of Linn-Benton's innovation councils a few years later.

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As a coauthor of the AACC 21st Century report (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014), which made recommendations for navigating emerging challenges to the mission of community colleges, Dr. Hamann was also able to introduce Linn-Benton to ideas that were closely tied to both its student success mission and guided pathways reforms. Dr. Hamann authored a section of the report on creating coherent programs for students, which is a key pathways concept. When the report was published, bound copies were made available on campus, and it became a bible for the college, cementing the centrality of student success within the college's new mission and paving the way for guided pathways.

## Introducing Guided Pathways to the College Community

### The Data-Based Rationale for Guided Pathways

The faculty and administrators who attended the first AACC Pathways Institute in early 2016 came away with the realization that to ensure guided pathways would be adopted in a meaningful way at Linn-Benton, it was critical to inform the college community about the nature and scope of the college's student success problems. To explain the rationale for adopting guided pathways using institutional data, college leaders hosted forums open to the entire college, where they focused on three simple points:

1. Only 11 percent of students were completing their chosen programs in three years.
2. Less than 30 percent of students were completing their chosen programs even in six years.

3. Financial aid awards, as dictated by the federal government, only cover 150 percent of time to degree. If students take more than three full-time years' worth of credits without earning a community college credential, they risk depleting funds to continue their education.

When members of the college community were asked if they found those data points acceptable, everyone agreed they did not.

Linn-Benton's leaders also revealed at these open forums that pass rates in individual courses were high, hovering around 83 percent. Nonetheless, they wanted to encourage faculty and administrators to think beyond success in individual courses and focus on students' progress through programs. High course pass rates indicated a substantial level of success at the classroom level, which in combination with stronger supports to guide students through programs could result in much higher college-wide rates of completion.

By sharing a few highly salient data points, college leaders were able to galvanize the college community to address barriers to student success created by the college's policies and practices. They concluded the forums by saying that whole-college changes like guided pathways were needed to address these problems, but that the community could work together to devise strategies specific to Linn-Benton.

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## Time for Creative Thinking and Deliberation

Linn-Benton's leaders sought to ensure that adopting guided pathways was not viewed as a project but as a cultural transformation that would entail shifting from a "student-interested" approach to a student-centered approach. Although students' needs were considered in decisions about processes such as scheduling and course development, they were not always the central concern. Thus, a cultural transformation would require a significant reevaluation of practices.

While senior leaders recognized the urgency for change, they understood that institution-wide reforms could not be rushed or forced, so the first year of the college's transformation process primarily consisted of reflection and creative discussions among faculty and staff about what guided pathways would look like at Linn-Benton, what reforms to adopt, and how to implement the desired changes. College leaders acknowledged that this stage in the reform process probably looked slow and messy, with "little progress on paper," but allowing time for these early deliberations was critical in minimizing internal battles and reducing the propensity for the college community to view potential reforms as a threat.

Especially important were the discussions that took place among faculty about the significance of the proposed reforms. When Linn-Benton joined the AACC Pathways Project, the president noted that though there was not uniform faculty support, faculty leaders, including the president of the faculty senate, were supportive. College leaders invited different faculty members to each AACC Pathways Institute and were careful to include both skeptics and proponents of the reforms. After two years, more

faculty members had been encouraged by their colleagues to engage with the reforms than would have been possible if administrators had tried to do this alone. The college also invited Dr. Rob Johnstone of the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (one of the eight partners leading the AACC Pathways Project) to campus to talk to faculty about guided pathways. The president noted that this was a key intervention; Johnstone's "disarming" style in his presentations allowed the college to move more quickly to a tipping point of majority faculty support.

Another strategy that helped secure faculty and staff's commitment to guided pathways reforms was embracing a part of the model that was already of interest: advising. Since 2007, a group of faculty had been interested in improving advising to improve retention and completion. Since many of these same faculty members also served on the college's core pathways team (see text box), making advising redesign a central aim of Linn-Benton's guided pathways reforms helped to further engage faculty.

### A Team Approach to Guided Pathways Reforms

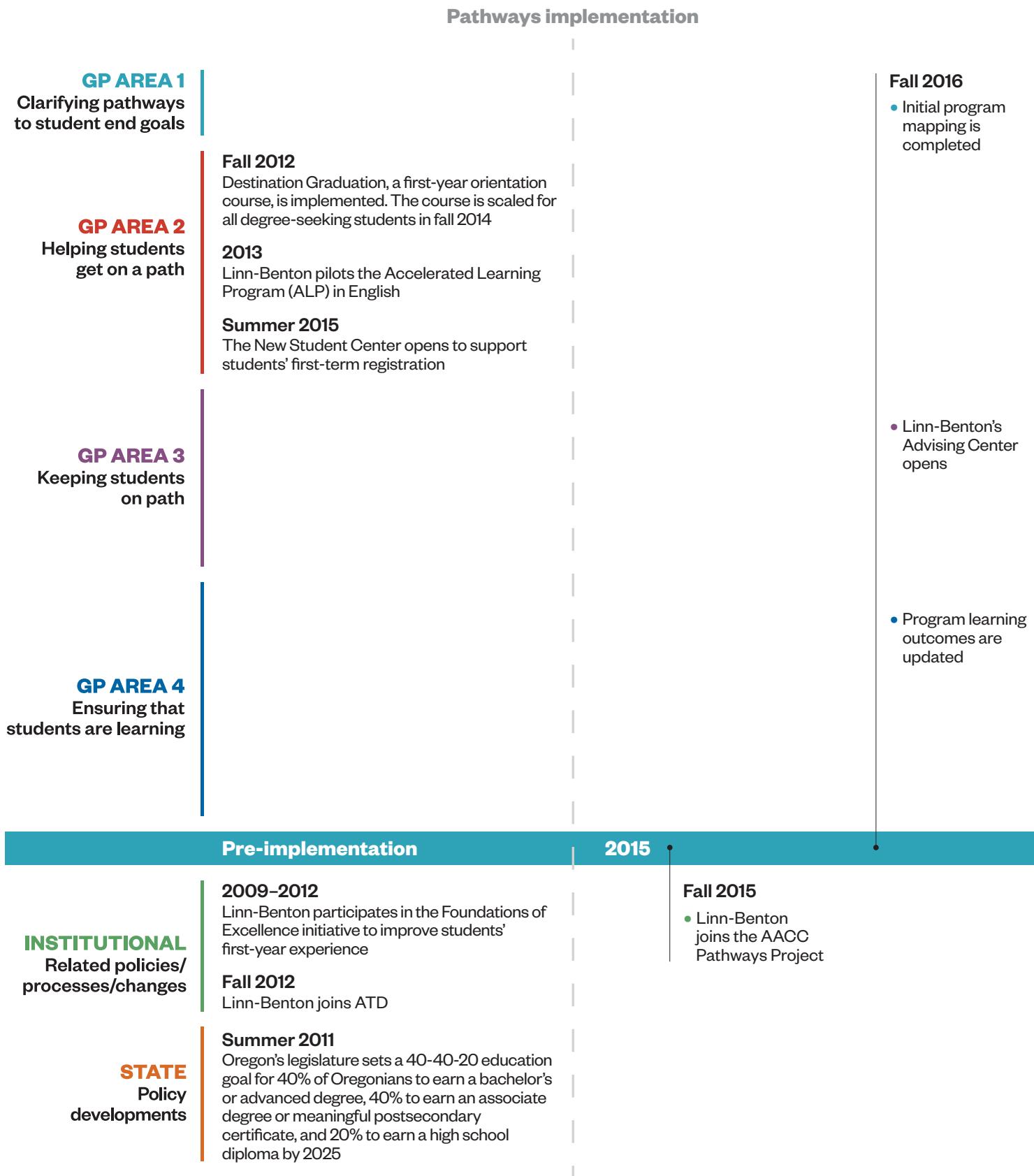
To design and implement its guided pathways reforms, Linn-Benton initially created a core pathways team of influential faculty members, managers, part-time and temporary staff, and staff from the institutional research and information technology offices. Depending on what ideas emerged after each AACC Pathways Institute, task forces made up of subgroups of core team members were created. Since 2016, Linn-Benton has created many task forces, including groups for program mapping, meta-majors, and student entry processes. The rest of the core team must review and approve any initiative devised by a task force, and its members stay abreast of relevant literature and emerging findings on guided pathways. Task forces disband when the college adopts their proposed reforms. For example, the student entry processes group disbanded once the New Student Center and the Advising Center opened. Currently, Linn-Benton has active early-alert and multiterm registration task forces. The college's leaders plan to include students on the core team in the future.

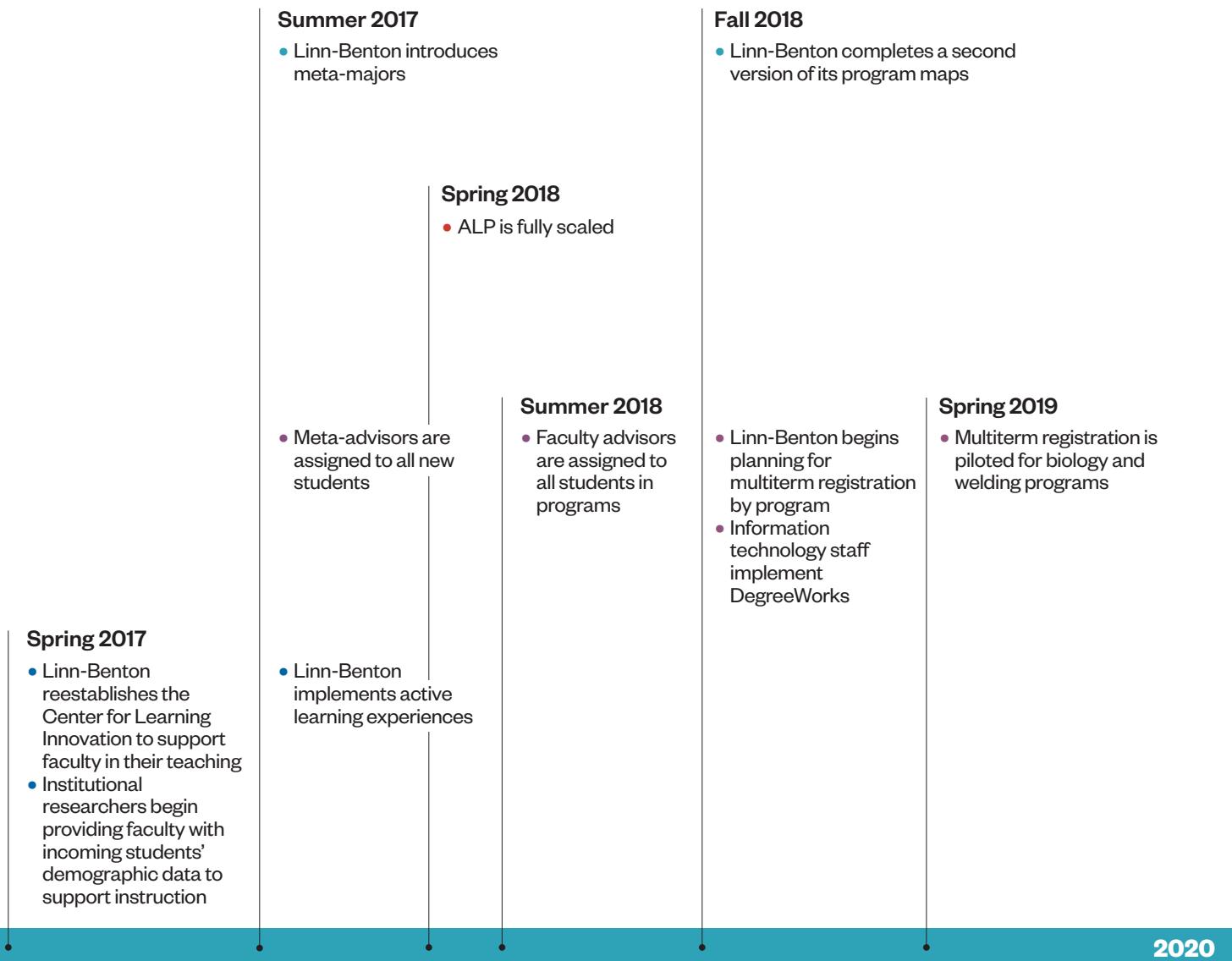
## Supporting Collaborative Planning and Implementation

### Distributed Responsibility for Advising

Linn-Benton faculty became interested in advising when they learned that the type of advising students received varied greatly depending on their program and enrollment status. For example, students in career-technical education programs, full-time students, and students involved in athletics received regular and proactive one-on-one support, while students in many transfer-oriented academic programs and part-time students received little guidance. Faculty observed that students in programs with smaller cohorts and faculty who were engaging in more intensive advising had more interaction with advisors and better outcomes, including higher levels of campus engagement and higher graduation rates.

# Timeline of Guided Pathways Implementation





These observations, combined with insights from new national research on the importance of proactive advising, spurred this group of faculty to consider ways to expand effective advising models to all students at Linn-Benton. Hearing from national experts during the AACC Pathways Institutes also motivated the college to move toward a mandatory advising model, in which all students would be assigned an advisor and receive advising throughout their program rather than just at the beginning.

Assigning current advisors larger caseloads and requiring more frequent points of contact with students would create unsustainable workloads for them. Instead, college leaders devoted resources to streamlining advising processes and created new roles for enrollment specialists and student ambassadors to reduce advisors' workload at the intake stage. In Linn-Benton's new model of advising, after students go through onboarding, they are assigned a meta-advisor connected to their meta-major who helps them explore the field and choose a major within it. When students are confident in their choice of major, they are transitioned to a faculty advisor, who provides program, transfer, and career-planning advisement specific to their programs. Together with the new hires, Linn-Benton's collaborative approach to advising redesign, with different staff and faculty responsible for advising at different points in the student journey, allowed the college to reduce its student–advisor ratio by half while increasing the robustness of advising support for all students.

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### Advising Resources From CCRC

#### *A Framework for Advising Reform*

Serena Klempin, Hoori Santikian Kalamkarian, Lauren Pellegrino, & Elisabeth A. Barnett | July 2019

#### *Redesigning Advising and Student Support: Tools for Practitioners*

Multiple Authors | July 2018

## Staff Support for Onboarding Activities

According to the dean of academic foundations and extended learning, the college's work with ATD revealed that students were not registering for the correct math and English courses in their initial terms. Staff inferred that the college's approach to onboarding was too much of an information dump and did not fully equip students to make good initial course choices.

In response, in 2015 Linn-Benton created the New Student Center, where recent enrollees could receive support for onboarding and course selection. Students now have individual appointments with enrollment specialists, who help them choose the optimal set of courses for their first term. To support students' orientation to the college and ensure that they are informed and prepared for their next steps, leaders of the New Student Center recruited staff whom the dean referred to as "the friendliest and most helpful people from all over campus" to help students identify the correct first-term courses. By mutual agreement, these employees were temporarily brought over from

other units and divisions, given the title of enrollment specialist, and trained on the college's curriculum and registration process.

The creation of the New Student Center allowed diverse stakeholders from across campus to learn about and become involved in student advising. One unanticipated positive outcome of this system was that enrollment experts cross-trained one another on the work of their various units and departments, which helped to break down silos and increase collective knowledge about the courses, programs, and services available to students. Making nonadvising staff responsible for onboarding and registration reduces the workload for full-time advisors while ensuring that all students are helped to explore their interests, clarify their goals, and select a program of study.

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## Curricular On-Ramps to Programs of Study

To facilitate advising at the New Student Center, faculty from each academic area created first-term guides with lists of courses—including any developmental requirements—that program students should take in their first term. Their work catalyzed the development of Linn-Benton’s seven meta-majors and subsequent program mapping efforts. The meta-majors Linn-Benton decided on, which are referred to at the college as “programs of study,” are:

- agriculture;
- business;
- education and social services;
- health and healthcare and nutrition and culinary;
- applied industrial technology and transportation;
- arts and humanities; and
- science, engineering, and math and computer science.

Planning these meta-majors also brought together faculty to develop new courses that give students the opportunity to explore their fields. Within the humanities and social sciences, faculty initially found it challenging to create career exploration activities, since jobs in those fields are “not jobs you have action figures for as a kid.” After more discussion and consideration, though, they were able to devise rich and relevant career exploration activities for their students. For example, the new Humanities 103 course, which meets a general education requirement for students in any program, provides a survey of humanities content and includes many guest speakers with jobs in the humanities to expose students to career options.

The dean of a transfer division noted that creating career exploration assignments energized faculty members by challenging them to promote their fields to students. This dean also observed that learning about the careers that different areas of study can lead to helps students understand the utility of what they are learning in their courses and gives them more motivation to persist through their programs.

# Sustaining and Institutionalizing Student Success Reforms

## Collaboration Across Divisions

The development of Linn-Benton's meta-majors, New Student Center, and distributed advising model created opportunities for collaboration across academic divisions, departments, and units. For example, the effort to create the meta-majors pushed faculty within each program area to collaborate on course development and think beyond their own courses or areas of specialization and consider the coherence of the program's curriculum as a whole.

According to the dean of a transfer division and the dean of a career-technical education division, the creation of Linn-Benton's meta-majors also led to greater communication between liberal arts and career-technical areas. Previously, these divisions and the courses and students within them were largely unconnected. Collaboration between division deans to design meta-majors, along with discussions about what the first term of courses should look like for students in career-technical and liberal arts programs, led to productive reconsiderations of how core courses could support students' development as a "total person." Students in different programs now collaborate on cross-curricular learning activities on campus. For example, in one such cross-disciplinary assignment, students in art and welding programs collaborated to make a public sculpture for the college, with the art students developing the design and the welding students leading the construction efforts.

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## Innovation Councils to Sustain and Energize Improvements

Dr. Hamann observed that to sustain guided pathways reforms, it is critical that the work remain dynamic and continue to evolve. He and other senior leaders at Linn-Benton are particularly interested in fostering institutional conditions that allow for ongoing innovation. Noting that systems tend to bureaucratize and self-preserve, Dr. Hamann developed innovation councils to counteract the tendency of reforms to ossify and slow further innovation. For example, Linn-Benton has a progression council focused on ensuring program pathways align with curricula at both high schools and four-year transfer destinations. It also has a learning innovation council that investigates ways to meet the educational demands of the future and a workforce council that continually assesses the expectations of employers in different fields to ensure programs teach the skills students will rely on most in their future careers.

The president also resurrected the Wild Thinkers Forum in 2018 and visited each of the innovation councils, asking them to brainstorm 99 "dumb ideas" without concern for institutional conventions or practical constraints. Dr. Hamann anticipates that the work of the innovation councils will sustain the college's current guided pathways work and encourage continued creativity, dynamism, and responsiveness to changes in institutional context.

## Guided Pathways as a Cultural Transformation

Dr. Hamann has said that “if you change the culture, the systems will follow,” and Linn-Benton continues to affirm guided pathways as a cultural transformation. For example, to solidify its critical improvements to student advising, the college instituted a new hiring criterion: New faculty must understand the importance of student advising to support completion and agree to participate in advising.

## Plans for Building on Improvements to Date

Linn-Benton plans to build on its current guided pathways reforms and continue to refine its structures and systems at scale. Areas of future focus are described below.

### Using Program Maps to Create Customized Educational Plans

In fall 2018, Linn-Benton’s program mapping team launched a website with interactive maps for all programs of study, and the college plans to conduct an annual review of the program maps. To further institutionalize their use, the program mapping team is working with departments and divisions to ensure that the maps are integrated into day-to-day operations. For example, the team is working with the information technology department to load the maps into DegreeWorks so they can be customized more easily for use by students in creating individualized educational plans. The team is also creating templates that will adjust students’ educational plans if they are initially placed in developmental education. Allowing for easy customization of students’ plans will further free up time for advisors to build relationships with students that are more personal and less transactional.

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### Designating First-Term Courses for Each Meta-major

Faculty and student services staff are delineating first-term courses for all meta-majors to facilitate students’ academic exploration while minimizing their accrual of excess credits.

### Implementing Yearlong Scheduling and Multiterm Registration

Once all students create full-program educational plans, Linn-Benton intends to use the data from these plans to devise full-year course schedules so that students can plan to take the courses they need when they need them. As most students take courses within a program of study, rather than creating a college-wide schedule, Linn-Benton plans to build a schedule for each program that minimizes scheduling conflicts for students. Once these schedules are created, the college plans to allow students to register for multiple terms so they can plan their work and school schedules far in advance.

## **Refining Transitions From Meta-advisors to Faculty Advisors**

Fall 2018 was the first term in which all new students were assigned to meta-advisors. Once these students have confirmed their major choice, they will be transitioned to faculty advisors in their major. Linn-Benton plans to collect qualitative data from advisors and students and use it to improve this transition process.

## **Supporting Students' Gateway Math Course Completion**

To move students more quickly into college-level math, math faculty are considering piloting a corequisite course that would combine the highest level of developmental math with introductory college-level algebra.

## References

American Association of Community Colleges. (2014). *Empowering community colleges to build the nation's future: An implementation guide*. Washington, DC: Author.

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